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THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES AND EDUCATORS IN DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENTAL GOALS

ABSTRACT

Universities and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are seen as having a social mission to deliver common good to society, both locally and globally. These institutions develop different policies due to global changes in Higher Education (HE), such as internationalisation and Sustainable Development (SD). They have an important role in setting sustainable developmental goals (SDGs) and also delivering them through teaching, research and other services. Effective delivery of SD practices relies upon educators who are directly involved in making the links between students and community. However, educators are not everywhere involved in developing policies, which impacts on their ability to deliver. This research, set in Scottish HEIs, investigates educators' perceptions of internationalisation in HE, how the concept is constructed and delivered in their universities, and what – if any – involvement these educators have in developing policy. This paper argues that educators, especially HE educators, have potential that is neglected in developing SDGs.

Keywords: *educators, internationalisation, sustainable developmental goals, policy-development, universities*

VLOGA UNIVERZ IN UČITELJEV PRI RAZVIJANJU IN URESNIČEVANJU CILJEV TRAJNOSTNEGA RAZVOJA - POVZETEK

Univerze in druge visokošolske ustanove naj bi imele družbeno poslanstvo, da prispevajo k skupnemu dobremu v družbi, tako lokalno kot globalno. Zaradi globalnih sprememb v visokem šolstvu te ustanove razvijajo različne politike, na primer internacionalizacije in trajnostnega razvoja. Pomembno vlogo opravljajo pri zastavljanju ciljev trajnostnega razvoja in pri doseganju teh ciljev prek poučevanja, raziskav in drugih storitev. Učinkovita realizacija praks trajnostnega razvoja je odvisna od učiteljev, ki so

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neposredno vpeti v ustvarjanje vezi med študenti in skupnostjo. Vendar pa učitelji niso vedno vključeni v razvijanje politik, kar vpliva na njihovo zmožnost doseganja ciljev. Raziskava škotskega visokega šolstva proučuje, kako učitelji dojemajo internacionalizacijo visokega šolstva, kako je ta koncept zastavljen in realiziran na njihovih univerzah in koliko – če sploh – učitelji sodelujejo pri oblikovanju politik. Članek zagovarja tezo, da imajo učitelji, posebej v visokem šolstvu, zmožnosti, ki so pri razvijanju ciljev trajnostnega razvoja spregledane.

Ključne besede: učitelji, internacionalizacija, cilji trajnostnega razvoja, razvoj politik, univerze

INTRODUCTION

The role played by educators in Higher Education (HE) is an important one in developing policies and practices that might address Sustainable Development (SD) needs within local communities and more broadly in a global context. There is a claim that universities and HE Institutions (HEIs) in the United Kingdom (UK) are well equipped to contribute towards SD (HEFCE, 2014). According to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), universities, HEIs and colleges are

well positioned to make a key contribution to the challenges and opportunities posed by sustainable development through their teaching and research, through their influence on students, staff and communities, and through their own operations. (HEFCE, 2014, p. 3)

In addressing the challenges posed by SD goals (SDGs) (UN General Assembly, 2015) educators play a key role as mediators, implementers, and creators of local and global education policies. In addition, they can be instrumental in developing sustainable policies in areas such as curriculum design/development, engaging students from different cultural backgrounds, internationalisation and its role in local and global communities, and enhancing quality of higher education in teaching and research.

Internationalisation in HE is globally accepted as a necessary policy, one which is undeniably linked to SD, at least in the global context. Regardless of internationalisation's global application, there is lack of clarity in defining the concept, which is constructed differently in the literature, in practice and in HE institutions in different countries. In addition, despite the acceptance of the concept of the internationalised university, there is a gap in research and documentation of educators' perceptions on internationalised universities (Daniels, 2013; Rizvi, 2010; Tran & Le, 2018). Yet, being an integral part of higher education institutions, educators play – or have the potential to play – a critical role in contributing to institutional strategies and policymaking (Tran & Le, 2018). In this paper we consider the linkages between internationalisation and SD, and claim that educators working in HE are well-placed to develop Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) through their pedagogical skills and direct connections to communities.

Cotton, Warren, Maiboroda, and Bailey (2007) have noted a rise in the significance of SD in education, and its emergence in universities and in HEIs, where there is support from leaders along with a commitment to promoting UNESCO's vision of SDGs (UNESCO, 2014b). However, in research currently being undertaken by one of the authors of this paper, it is suggested that some Scottish educators at least have been offered few opportunities, perhaps none at all, to have their say in developing institutional policies, such as internationalisation, which has a significant role in SD. In addition, the data from that study suggests that educators have different understandings of internationalisation as well as different opinions on developing internationalisation policies, possibly due to the different philosophies and priorities of the particular institutions and their geographical locations. Yet this diversity of thought could be better captured and applied to enhancing policy development in HEIs. Due to educators' limited role in institutional policymaking, their ability to influence policy application is constrained. There is a gap in the literature on studying educators' perspectives of the internationalisation phenomenon, and we claim that educators' knowledge of internationalisation could inform the application of SD strategies. We argue that educators in HEIs need to be given greater opportunities to be involved in policy development as mediators, implementers, and creators of local and global education policies. Such involvement, we claim, has the potential to create opportunity for much greater – and pedagogically appropriate – incorporation of SD into HE curricula and policy.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This paper is informed by ongoing doctoral research focusing on educators working in HE and their lack of involvement in important strategic activities, such as policymaking, in their workplaces. The research, set in Scottish HEs, investigates educators' perceptions of internationalisation in HE, how the concept is constructed and delivered in their universities, and what – if any – involvement these educators have in developing policy. Gathering the perspectives of educators is an important aspect of that research and we believe they are well placed to play a major role in driving HEI strategies and policies. Whilst the focus of that research is on internationalisation, the potential of the HE educator to influence and develop policy has relevance across all areas of HE, including that of Sustainable Development (SD). In fact, understanding the concept of internationalisation may be an advantage when considering SD – an essential aspect of the education remit according to UNESCO (2018) – since sustainability must be understood in a global as well as local context.

The focus on internationalisation in HE and becoming an internationalised university has become a key priority (de Wit, 2013; Knight, 2014; Wihlborg & Robson, 2018). The drivers for internationalisation of higher education impact on various stakeholders: students (Leask, 2001), educators (Carrozza & Minucci, 2014), and managers (Marginson, 2011). Internationalisation operates through the mobility of educators and students (Kim, 2009), institutional strategy (Marginson, 2007), curriculum development (Knight, 2011), research and publications (Knight, 2003), and international research partnerships

(Kim, 2017). According to de Wit (2010), the rationales that drive the internationalisation agenda in HE are mainly constructed on four comprehensive categories: “political rationales, economic rationales, social and cultural rationales, and academic rationales” (p. 9). The first major category, the political rationale, includes “foreign policy, national security, technical assistance, peace and mutual understanding, national identity and regional identity” (ibid.). These are all significant factors in considering institutional SD policies that could impact on society.

Economic rationales, the second category, are “growth and competitiveness, national educational demand, labour market, [and] financial incentives” (ibid.), and are of interest to governments which focus and rely increasingly on globalisation. It has been shown that universities and HEIs increase their revenue system through the export of education-related services and charging a premium fee for international students (Altbach & Knight, 2007), helping them to sustain and develop international competitiveness (Harris, 2009).

The third category, social and cultural cohesion in HEIs, has always been problematic and, according to de Wit (2010), has a coercive element: problematic because HEIs may not have a holistic approach to diversity of culture, and coercive because staff and students are expected to fit into the ‘home’ culture. In addition, as Scott (2005) reports, educators act as *mediators* for students to experience national and international cultures. This helps to construct international values and, above all, to promote cross-cultural understandings which, in turn, leads to global citizenship (Chan & Dimmock, 2008; Knight, 2007).

Finally, academic rationales include “developing an international and intercultural dimension in your research, teaching and services, extension of the academic horizon, institutional building, profile and status, the improvement of quality and international academic standards” (de Wit, 2010, p. 9). This institutional driver involves high levels of competition, modernisation globally, and building a competitive brand; these have become the focus of internationalisation of higher education systems (Marginson, 2011). HEIs compete to succeed in the top rankings so that they can attract students and parents; these high rankings can also serve to showcase the institution to other stakeholders, such as knowledge transfer partnerships and funding bodies (Chan & Dimmock, 2008).

Clearly, therefore, there is a relationship between the concepts of internationalisation and sustainable development, and the role of education (and so the educator) in both is an important one. Education, according to Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, “is the most powerful path to sustainability” (UNESCO, 2014a, p. 16). Yet, while SD is clearly defined by international organisations like UNESCO, there is less clarity around what internationalisation means.

DEFINING INTERNATIONALISATION IN HE

The concept of internationalisation has been interpreted in various ways and finding a single common definition is a challenging task; the concept is viewed differently across

countries, cultures and educational systems (Knight, 2003). Indeed, Knight claims that any definition of the concept would need to be broadly accepted in the field of education and to consider the specific role played by educational systems in society. Concepts that many researchers consider key to successful implementation of internationalisation strategies at HEIs, such as curriculum development, research, partnership, and mobility, concur with de Wit's (2010) categories above. However, beyond this broad agreement, perceptions of internationalisation differ greatly. In fact, Knight (2003) suggests that, because of the evolving nature of internationalisation, no single policy statement could be used to define this complex phenomenon. For example, Hudzik's (2011) focus is on a holistic view, one that shapes the ethos and values of the institution, while de Wit (2015) focuses on process. Arum and van de Water (1992), in their activity-based definition, focus on three elements in particular, defining internationalisation as "the multiple activities, programs and services that fall within international studies, international education exchange and technical cooperation" (p. 202). Jane Knight is perhaps the most prominent scholar addressing the issue of defining internationalisation and her definition has been adopted by the International Association of Universities (IAU):

[Internationalisation is] the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education at the institutional and national levels (Knight, 2008, p. 21).

Knight's process-based definition acknowledges the evolutionary nature of internationalisation and, in particular, emphasises the need for continuous effort at all levels, fitting well with the characteristics of SD. The scope of internationalisation is thus specified using three main dimensions: international, cultural, and global. The international dimension denotes the relation between countries and nations; the intercultural dimension represents the relation between different cultures; and the global dimension reflects a worldwide view and global reach in the 21st century.

The ongoing research from which this paper is drawn uses a definition of internationalisation based on Arum and Van De Water (1992) and Knight (2008), as follows:

Internationalisation is a collection of multiple activities including developing an international curriculum, student-staff mobility, and technical cooperation that reflects multiple processes such as relationships between countries and cultures, representation of different cultures within countries, and applying this global perspective to teaching, research and other services of HE institutions.

Within this definition are activities and approaches that are in line with, and facilitators of, a number of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) developed by the UN General Assembly in 2015.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE ROLE OF HEIS AND EDUCATORS

The role played by HE in achieving SD is made clear in the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN General Assembly, 2015). Seventeen SDGs have been proposed as part of this agenda, and a number of these goals are relevant to HEIs and universities, showing how they might address SD in local communities and in broader society. The UN has also suggested that HE should have a global focus because of the significance of its role. This definition of SD suggests that not only should present conditions be taken into account, but that future needs must be treated with equal importance. Bass and Dalal-Clayton (2012) explain this, noting that over the past decades there have been significant developments in many areas, due to increases in industrialisation, population, life expectancy rates, literacy rates, food production, and income levels. They also recognise that some of these developments can cause substantial damage and their effects can impact significantly on future generations.

As key institutions in society, HEIs are expected to contribute to the development of local and global communities through teaching and research activities (Waas, Verbruggen, & Wright, 2010). They have a responsibility in both shaping strategies for the development of society and also in delivering them through a diverse range of teaching and other activities and services. According to Lozano et al. (2013), in doing so, many universities and HEIs have in fact contributed significantly in developing and educating “decision-makers, leaders, entrepreneurs, and academics” (p. 3). Universities, however, have become increasingly commercialised, and now compete in an ever more challenging, economically-driven market (Ball, 2012; Giroux, 2016). In doing so, the meaning and purpose of HE has shifted, according to Giroux (2016), who notes that the force of neoliberalism has led not only to these changes but also to a “diminished belief” in the purpose of HE as producer of critical thought. Giroux claims that, in fact, “the only questions being asked about knowledge production, the purpose of education, the nature of politics, and our understanding of the future are largely determined by market forces” (pp. 195–6). Such changes are significant for both education and sustainability; they make the case for universities serving their communities through relevant research, knowledge production, and critical engagement more difficult, yet more crucial.

Despite this market-driven push, researchers such as Wright (2004) and Barth, Michelsen, and Sanusi (2011) claim that society in fact still sees universities and HEIs as key providers of knowledge and contributors to progress in society, and expects that they should be leading action on SD locally, nationally, and globally. Waas et al. (2010) go further, suggesting that HE has a social and moral responsibility to work to address the needs of society through SD policies and practice. According to Cortese (1992), universities bear

profound responsibilities to increase the awareness, knowledge, technologies, and tools to create an environmentally sustainable future. Universities have the expertise necessary to develop the intellectual and conceptual framework to achieve

this goal, and must play a strong role in education, research, policy development, information exchange and community outreach. (Cortese, 1992, p. 1110)

As major educational institutions, HEIs are perfectly positioned to influence, reinforce, and deliver education in line with the UN's SDGs (Cotton et al., 2007; IAU, 2016). Indeed, IAU (2016) claims that HE "underpins all the SDGs" (p.1), and to this end the organisation has been instrumental in developing tools for HE research into SD. These tools are available to all HEIs (IAU, 2016), yet many HEIs and academics do not make full use of these and other online tools. In some cases this is because SD is viewed as a discrete discipline (Santos & Filho, 2005). Because it is only usually environmentally-related courses and programmes that focus on SD (Waas et al., 2010), there is a need for HE to focus more on developing a holistic approach that sees the integration of SD across all disciplines (Ferrer-Balas et al., 2010; Fien, 2002).

Cortese (1992) forecast that universities and HEIs could play a vital role in future and that SDGs could be delivered successfully on a large scale since universities have extensive resources ranging from expertise to technology. Despite this, SD, as part of HE philosophy, is still in its initial stages in many universities (Lozano, Lozano et al., 2013) with many still following traditional methods in contributing to the SDGs (Elton, 2003). It is also suggested that in some universities there can be a resistance to change and this leads to unsustainable practices (Sterling & Scott, 2008). Lozano, Luckman et al. (2013) claim that as long as universities and HEIs follow traditional teaching approaches, they will lack the capacity to deliver for a sustainable society.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS IN SD

Educators working in HE understand the importance of the concepts that define internationalisation, the concepts that are integral to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Their roles as curriculum designers and teachers mean they are also well-placed to relate those concepts to real-life contexts, and their expertise is invaluable to appropriate programme design. Having direct links with their students and the community places them centrally as facilitators of both their HEI's policies and community needs. In addition, the research capacities of academics provide them with opportunities to establish understandings of diverse community needs and to identify potential solutions. Educators are also part of those communities, so often have a direct interest in seeing their community thrive.

Educators in HEIs are encouraged to reflect on their own particular social and cultural assumptions, as well as to reflect on their own practices. They must ensure that their pedagogical methods are appropriate to an international audience, and in doing this they are expected to deliver an internationalised curriculum, outline culturally-appropriate evaluation methodologies, and engage in cross-border research and educational exchanges (Black, 2004; Leask, 2007). Understanding what internationalisation is, and how it is applied in different contexts, is an essential part of HE work in the 21st century. SD is also

a global concept, and educators' increased understanding of internationalisation could enable them to develop appropriate curricula and undertake research that is relevant to culturally-specific community needs.

Educators' understanding of the context in which they perform their academic work – their *insider knowledge* – may have crucial value in maintaining relevance in policy development. Educators can be seen, in fact, as central to the successful implementation of SD policies in HE. IAU (2016) has recognised the importance of educators and their significance in driving the process for SD in HEIs both in the present and in future. As developers, mediators, and implementers of institutional policies, educators play a key role in facilitating the whole process of education (Arnold & Burke, 1983).

The role of educators is viewed as multi-dimensional (Reid & Petocz, 2006), and not limited just to the multiple tasks they perform in an educational context. It is more than that, for they also have a social responsibility towards the community for which that educational provision is designed (IAU, 2016). UNESCO (2014b) recognises that HE educators in certain contexts, due to global location or cultural expectations, for example, still practice unsustainable lifestyles. Educators may therefore, in some cases, need further training to develop the required skills and competencies in developing and delivering the institutional vision. Stromquist (1997) suggests that this training should be relevant to both learner needs and political context. Various initiatives provided by UNESCO, such as the “Global Action Programme (GAP)” on “Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)” (UNESCO, 2018) are designed to overcome these concerns.

UNESCO (2018) also suggests that HEIs need re-orientation in order to develop the scope for all learners to gain “knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes” that are directed towards contributing to the SDGs (p. 133). The emphasis on learners and learning suggests that UNESCO understands the important role of the educator in these processes. However, to play a genuinely significant role, educators must have opportunities for developing the areas of their professional practices that are essential to embed and deliver SD in the curriculum. UNESCO (2018) also emphasises the importance to institutions of this focus, and of motivating educators by involving them in framing institutional policies; doing so will not only reflect positively on institutional practices but will also bring about positive changes to curricula by using educators' pedagogical skills and knowledge of their communities. Educators' *insider knowledge* could be used in developing policies and a culturally sensitive curriculum that addresses the sustainability needs of society.

Internationalisation in HE is instrumental in supporting educators in understanding, accommodating, and developing a culture that facilitates the successful implementation of SD policies in their institutions. UNESCO (2005) notes that there is a need to integrate culture and SD, and that “[c]ulture is increasingly recognized as an essential dimension of sustainable development, particularly since the 2002 Johannesburg Summit” (p. 30). This global organisation thus makes it clear that, to be successful, SDGs must have culture integrated into their policies and practices, as is the case with internationalisation.

CHALLENGES FACED BY EDUCATORS IN HE

Studies show that the perspectives of senior academics such as Deans and Heads of Schools play a vital role in initiating and executing change in HE, and yet they are not often involved in constructing such significant policies (Bell, 2004; Green & Mertova, 2010). Given this fact, it is not surprising that educators themselves do not seem to play a significant role either. This under-representation could be due to a number of factors. For example, pressure to compete academically – the “responsibility to perform” (Ball, 2012, p. 19) – often leads to anxiety and stress, and leaves educators with little time to focus elsewhere (Hall & Bowles, 2016). Tran and Le (2018) suggest that educators need significant professional development to implement institutional policies successfully. Indeed, as educators interviewed as part of an ongoing doctoral research project have suggested, there may also be a lack of encouragement from senior management, or even pressure not to become involved.

While educators face a number of challenges in current HE practice, one that could be addressed easily and effectively is that of involvement in policy development. HE academics are well situated to understand the processes of policy implementation and have a wealth of expertise that could be employed by increasing their involvement in developing policy. The role of educators in the process of internationalising universities, for example, has been investigated by a number of scholars, and these studies show that educators are by and large viewed as the empowering agents of internationalisation in HEIs and are the academics who will decide the achievement or failure of internationalisation methodologies (Black, 2004; Poole, 2005; Leask, 2007). The same potential applies to integrating SD into policy development.

However, educators face institutional barriers; as Tran and Le (2018) state, the universities’ role in addressing the needs of educators is being neglected. Institutional policies directly impact upon educators’ roles, yet the literature indicates that educators do not have enough input into developing these policies. Curriculum development is a key area in which educators could apply expertise, yet they may be limited due to time and other institutional constraints. Another reason for the lack of educators’ input may be due to the fact that there is no shared understanding of SDGs, for example, at the institutional level (Reid & Petocz, 2006). Whilst educators are believed to play a key role in facilitating policies, and although these policies have a direct impact on educators, students, and society (Beelen & Leask, 2010), the participants in the ongoing research project observe that policies are usually dictated by a top-down approach. Velazquez, Munguia, and Sanchez (2005) also suggest that educators’ views on sustainability in HE are not fully investigated and this is reflected in institutional change initiatives. The risk is that, by universities ignoring the views of educators, these organisations may experience a resulting resistance to change and to the integration of institutional SDGs (Cotton et al., 2007). According to Dawe, Jucker, and Martin (2005), lack of input from educators could result in non-participation in institutional initiatives, affecting successful implementation of SDGs.

Whatever the reasons, there seems to be a clear lack of input from educators into developing and delivering policy in HEIs. The expertise of educators is being neglected (Bell, 2004; Green & Mertova, 2010) by not involving them in the process of planning. Our claim is that, if educators were more involved in policy design and implementation, HEIs would be more prepared to produce sustainable and culturally-appropriate policies that are more globally applicable and, at the same time, more relevant to sustainability issues of particular communities.

Proctor (2016) suggests that, as educators are the ones who deliver institutional policies, their involvement is significant, and institutions should recognise their needs, because appropriate recognition for educators could result in higher levels of commitment and involvement. Negotiating the specific demands of educators could result in the successful implementation of institutional strategies useful to both local and global communities (Tran & Le, 2018).

CONCLUSION

HE is well-placed to develop the capacity to address the needs of the communities it is expected to serve and to deliver education and research that will promote sustainability in those communities. By embedding SD as an institutional concept, HE can, in fact, be instrumental in effecting changes. Such changes to the institutional agenda, however, could bring with them challenges if HE is to participate in addressing SD issues. As we have seen, these issues include: increasing social and economic inequality in communities; environmental deprivation and degradation; and other issues that affect global communities and their quality of life.

We have shown that an understanding of internationalisation is helpful in developing SD policy and practice, and that educators in HEIs have the, as yet largely underappreciated, expertise to contribute to policy development. Internationalisation of HE brings not only economic benefits for the university but also brings an understanding of cultural diversity both locally and globally, and with this global perspective, educators have the expertise to successfully design and deliver SDG-focused curriculum for many culturally diverse contexts.

Through their curriculum design and teaching, educators play a key role in implementing institutional strategies; they could also be instrumental in developing sustainable policies, that is, they have the expertise to incorporate SDGs into university work, but they do face challenges. Understanding the challenges faced by educators is important if their role in embedding SD in HE is to be facilitated.

Educators, as the conduit between management and learners, are the key implementers of institutional educational policies and have the capacity to influence shaping the curriculum in a way that could deliver to the needs of community and enhance learning in the community. But educators need to have greater say and greater involvement in policymaking. Any educational process of developing community links for sustainability is

contextually dependent, but, using the concept of internationalisation, and informed by the understandings of HE educators, the university could become a more important and a much more relevant player in developing a sustainable society. Although the doctoral research referred to in this paper has been undertaken in selected Scottish universities with educators working in those universities, the data can be, to some extent, applicable more globally, and the project will serve as a starting point for similar research in other contexts.

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